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From the Congressional Record

Senator Lott Applauds President Bush's Education Initiative

The following excerpts were taken from remarks in the Congressional Record made by Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott on January 23, 2001, as the Senate prepared to receive the President's blueprint for education reform.

We need an education system in America that is focused on one thing, and that is children learning.

Today the President of the United States will keep his promise to America's schoolchildren. He will articulate for the Nation a vision of America, a public school system that serves the children and leaves no child behind. Under President Bush, our public schools can and will be doorways to opportunity. In Texas, he has proven that every child, particularly our disadvantaged children, can excel. As President, he will bring that same determination to all of our Nation's children.

Our schools should be measured by what our children learn. I have said on this floor many times that I am the son of a schoolteacher, a lady who taught school for 19 years. I am very proud of it. . . . I went to public schools all my life. So did my wife and so did my children. I remember distinctly the best teachers I ever had in my life were my teachers in the second, third, and fourth grades at Duck Hill, MS. Those teachers affected my life. They taught me the basics. They taught me to read. . . . They came from a small poor school, but they made a difference in my whole life, more than my college professors, more than my high school teachers. We have to make sure we have that for every child in America.

No child --no child-- in America should be trapped in failing schools just because he lacks the economic means to have a choice or to make sure he gets a good education. We have to be prepared to think outside the box. What we have been doing is not working in every school. . . . We have schools where children are just not getting a quality education. They are not learning. They are not safe. They are in danger from all kinds of things in these schools. So we have to keep the good ones good and make them even better, but we have to make sure those other schools can be brought up. That is a local responsibility, a State responsibility.

But, yes, the Federal Government has a role to play. There are many things we can do to be helpful in that area. The President's proposals will help us address that.

Parents have a right to hold schools to high standards and know that their schools are meeting those high standards. Our children excel when they are exposed to basics, going back to the points I made about reading. Our early childhood programs should focus on reading first, and we should not be afraid to measure those programs to make sure they are succeeding and not merely just well-intentioned programs that do not produce results. Also, character counts. There is a program called Character Counts in America. I think we need to incorporate that in how we teach. We should never shy away from teaching that basic lesson to our students.

These basic principles work. They have worked in Texas, they have worked in other parts of the country, and they have formed the cornerstone of the President's education initiatives. Under Governor Bush, African American 4th grade students have made the largest gains in the country in math and science. In fact, they had the highest test scores in their peer group of any State in the Nation. Hispanic students have made similar gains, scoring second highest of Hispanics in all States. We can and should do the same thing for all of America's children.

The President's education plan is based on a simple premise: Those who know our children best—parents, teachers, and principals—should determine how to prioritize our education dollars. The needs in rural America are often left out, and they are quite different from those in our cities. It makes sense that local schools have the freedom to design programs that meet individual needs. The compulsion in Washington has always been to have one size that fits all which they dictate from Washington.

What is needed in Pascagoula, my hometown, is obviously, on its face, different from what they need in Pittsburgh, PA. So we need that local flexibility, that local control, and with accountability that goes along with it. In exchange for that freedom, the President proposes to hold States accountable for the one thing that matters, and that is to make sure our children are learning.

There are many special interests in education. Many of them will raise their voices against the President's plan. They will use tactics to try to distract from what we are trying to accomplish by advocating other things and new programs. I think we need to go with what works and to make sure the only interests that matter are the interests of our children and that they are learning.

I believe this commonsense approach will form the kind of principles that can improve our education in America. I believe we can, in this area, reach bipartisan agreement. . . . We can have Republicans and Democrats who can come together on this because what President Bush is proposing is not Republican or Democrat; it is what has worked and what will work. So I invite my colleagues on both sides of the aisle, let's engage in this issue. Let's move this bill.

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